

Lost In Iowa

BY JENNIFER WILSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

From an overlook at Bellevue State Park, visitors can see for miles upstream along the Mississippi River. Open water created by lock and dam 12 is a magnet for soaring bald eagles looking for an easy winter meal of shad stunned from passing through the dam.





Between the Bluffs

Think there's nothing to do in Iowa in deep winter? Bellevue's abundant bald eagles, active main street and quirky lodging may change your mind.

**ABOUT 25 MILES SOUTH OF
ADUBUQUE, THERE IS A PLACE.**

**It's lovely year-round, but it's very
special when most of the state is in deep
hibernation.**

No matter how cold it gets, you can still travel to Bellevue, a pretty little village sandwiched between two bluffs on Lock and Dam No. 12 on the Upper Mississippi River, a picturesque haven that's teeming with bald eagles.

We are talking tons of bald eagles.

We cannot overstate the number of bald eagles in Bellevue.

Bellevue is a perfect storm of favorable conditions for the national bird. They're here because of the easy fishing on the dam. They're here because those two bookending

bluffs protect the riverfront shops and eateries (and eagles) from harsh winds.

They're here because the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, plus the in-town state park on the south bluff, give them safe places to hang around.

And across the river is a densely wooded island that no sensible human would ever walk upon, so the eagles love it. Even a drive-by traveler can spot tens of them roosting peacefully in its trees.

In the cold and often relentless Iowa winter, Bellevue is the rare abundant pleasure.

The town, the lock, and the eagles

On a gray February morning, water cascades in a smooth

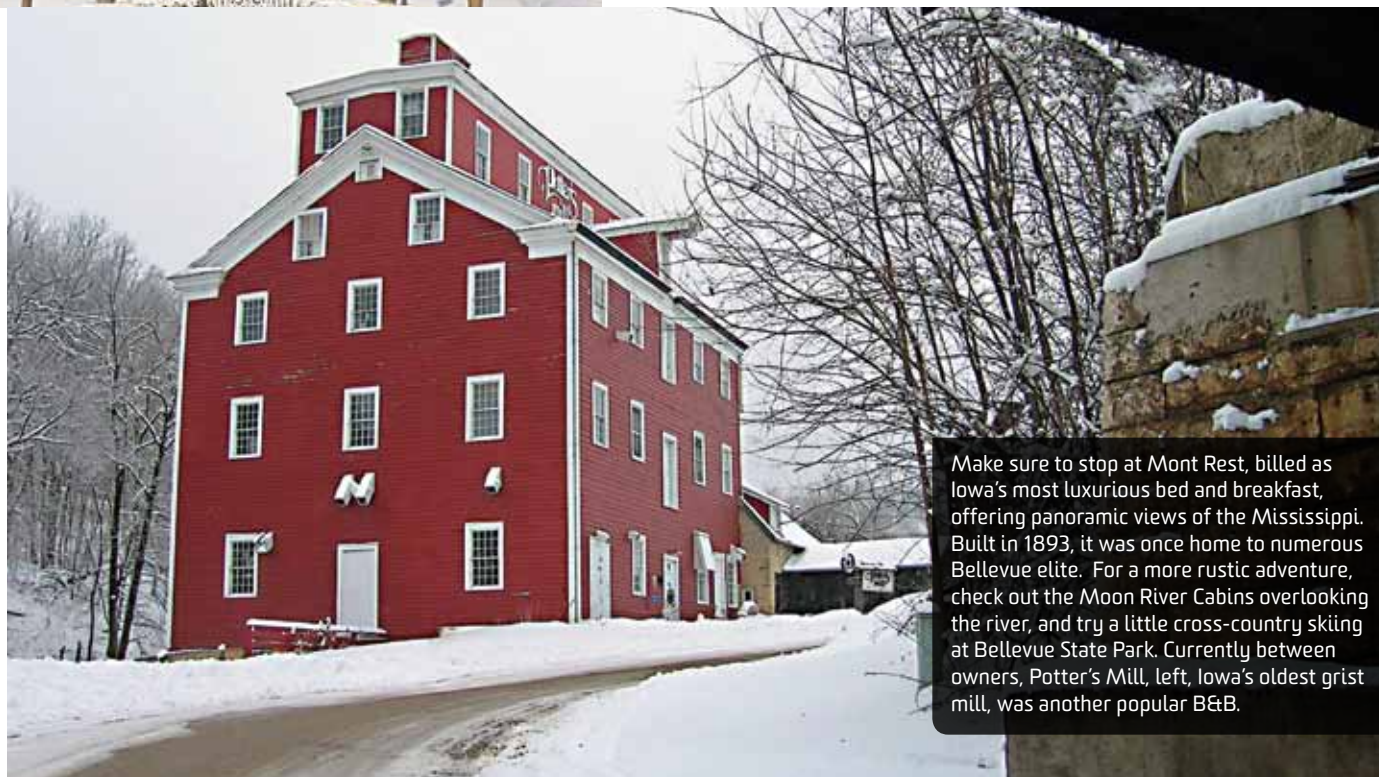
Lost In Iowa



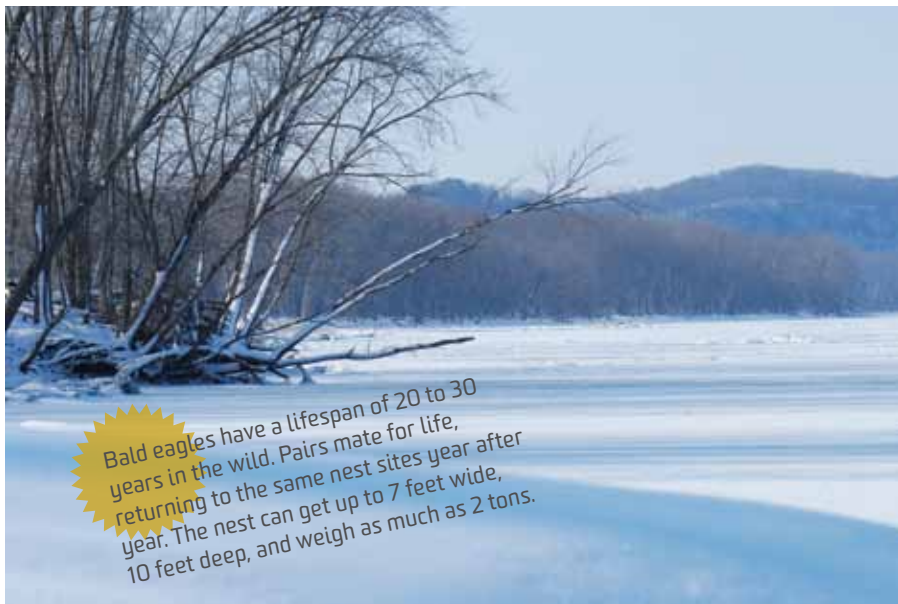
Mont Rest



Moon River Cabins



Make sure to stop at Mont Rest, billed as Iowa's most luxurious bed and breakfast, offering panoramic views of the Mississippi. Built in 1893, it was once home to numerous Bellevue elite. For a more rustic adventure, check out the Moon River Cabins overlooking the river, and try a little cross-country skiing at Bellevue State Park. Currently between owners, Potter's Mill, left, Iowa's oldest grist mill, was another popular B&B.



Bald eagles have a lifespan of 20 to 30 years in the wild. Pairs mate for life, returning to the same nest sites year after year. The nest can get up to 7 feet wide, 10 feet deep, and weigh as much as 2 tons.



curtain over a roller gate of Lock and Dam No. 12, the easterly heart of the riverfront village of Bellevue, 556.7 miles above the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

Bubblers keep the water moving around the lock otherwise surrounded by a patchy plain of ice.

It is a quiet morning.

Because of the silence, your eyes scan for something of interest. It doesn't take long to find it: The number of giant birds in the trees, in the sky, on the river, is astonishing.

A fast count finds about 60 bald eagles milling around Lock and Dam No. 12, which is, in itself, a beautiful old thing.

The antique behemoth is one of many fixed concrete barriers along the Mississippi River that manage the water's depth. Each dam has a lock chamber that raises and lowers boats to allow them passage (see sidebar).

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that operates it, the lock foundation is set in sand, gravel and silt, with dimensions of 110 feet wide by 600 feet long. The dam system consists of a concrete structure with 10 movable gates and a non-overflow earthen dike with a concrete ogee overflow spillway.

It takes eight hours for water to travel from Lock and Dam No. 11, in Dubuque, to Lock and Dam No. 12 in Bellevue.

"The locks and dams on the Mississippi River are like a staircase," says lockmaster Bill Hainstock. "St. Paul is the upper step and then it drops down as the river moves downstream. Before the dams, the Mississippi was a constantly flowing stream."

The unfrozen opening in the ice created by the lock and dam is prime hunting ground for bald eagles. Fish that pass through its gates are stunned and easy targets.

Men from the Works Progress Administration constructed Lock and Dam No. 12 between 1934 and 1938—an incredible build with an all-timber framework. "No plywood back then," says Hainstock.

The structure was built with a 50-year life expectancy, but that old-school construction, plus careful maintenance, keeps it in good working order. As a result, when you examine No. 12 from the public park walkway on shore, you'll see a largely original structure that's on the National Register of Historic Places. *(See construction photos at www.mvr.usace.army.mil/Library.aspx)*

The dam doesn't lock through boats in winter, but the drama continues with all the eagles hanging around. Every now and then, the morning's avian roustabouts take off from nearby trees to swoop down for fish. It's common to see them on riverfront branches with a kill in their talons, and it's amazing to see such a wild thing up close. Shoppers on the active main street—with a bookstore, a decent coffee place and a variety of shops—often admire them from swings on the riverfront park.

The Savanna Army Depot lies across the river on the Illinois side, a 13,000-acre island opened in 1917 as a U.S. Army weapons proving and testing facility (in short, they

blew things up there). Declared a Superfund site in 1984, the land is still fairly untouched by humans—warning signs for unexploded ordnance are posted all over—but casual observance would indicate that the eagles like it quite a bit, especially now that it's a part of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Bald eagles stand around on the ice, too, pecking at chubs, and somehow the backdrop of frozen white gives you a better idea of their massive size.

Standing, a bald eagle can be up to 3 feet tall.

Prairie and a past

The south bluff overlooking town is topped by Bellevue State Park, 788-acres known in summer for its butterfly garden, but the high-up location makes it a scenic stop year-round. (The park is split into two units, the Nelson Unit, mentioned in this section, and the Dyas Unit, three miles south of town, mentioned in Trip Notes.)

In winter, you can snowshoe, cross country ski or go birding. A unique peregrine falcon nest box on the face of the bluff facing Highway 52 looks like a school desk sticking out of the rock. A peregrine was spotted defending the nest box for a couple weeks in late May 2013, and will hopefully return with a mate in spring 2014.

Park manager Shannon Petersen walks the property, pointing out a recent prairie restoration in the hunting area, helped along by local wildlife staff and advocates. There's a sunflower food plot for dove hunters. In some places, it's almost solid wild indigo.

"I would love to see more families here. Families with kids stay too cooped up in winter," she says. "Even when it's cold and snowy, there's so much to do."

Five miles of short paths include Quarry Trail, which passes an old lime kiln once used at the Potter's Mill—the "quarry" is a half-mile hollowed-out area of bluff.

"This is young prairie right here," Petersen says, indicating a patch of land along Meadow Trail that used to be a nine-hole sand green. The nature center floor is pocked from long-ago golf spikes, along with specimens such as a surprisingly fierce river otter and a blonde raccoon pelt.

There's a lot of history in this concentrated area, even in the road and stone structures built in 1928 by a black prison crew from Anamosa. Woodland Indian mounds overlook the river, ancient burial sites Petersen says were constructed one basket load of dirt at a time. She points out what may be a Native American directional oak.

Even though the park is uniquely situated so close to town, many wild creatures call it home, with wild turkey, fox, deer and pheasant among the inhabitants. Red fox tracks stitch the trail near the mounds.

"When I'm cutting grass in the summer, wild turkey are running in front of the mower," she says. "It's a great place to look at animal tracks or cross-country ski the trails. Or just build snowmen."

Lost In Iowa

High atop the bluffs, Bellevue State Park offers a majestic view of the namesake town below. Lock and Dam 12 controls and maintains river navigation in pool 12 from Bellevue upstream to Dubuque and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

THE ANATOMY OF LOCK AND DAM No 12

"We're in charge of locking boats and pool control of the Mississippi River," says lockmaster Bill Hainstock. "That's what we're here for: We maintain a 9-foot channel for navigation on the Mississippi River as authorized by Congress in the 1930s."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) built a series of dams to maintain this depth. The movable dam measures 8,369 feet long, with four concrete pier houses connected by a metal grate walkway. It consists of seven submersible Tainter gates (20 feet high by 64 feet long) and three submersible roller gates (20 feet high by 100 feet long).

If any of these 10 gates need repair—they're more than 70 years old—the roof is detachable.

To allow river traffic to pass through, the dam has a lock, a device for raising and lowering boats in a chamber 110 feet wide and 600 feet long. It locates on the Iowa side of the dam near Riverside Park.

According to the USACE, the maximum watercraft lift is nine feet, with an average of six. It takes approximately 10 minutes to fill or empty the lock chamber.

Hainstock says that at the beginning of each day, he gets an e-mail report from USACE hydrologists in the Clock Tower Building in Rock Island that tells he and his staff how to adjust the dam gates to keep the channel at 9 feet—this is manual adjustment, not computerized.

In warmer months, the staff also operates the lock. Two lock operators handle this task—one on the upper end of the lock, one on the lower. Here's how:

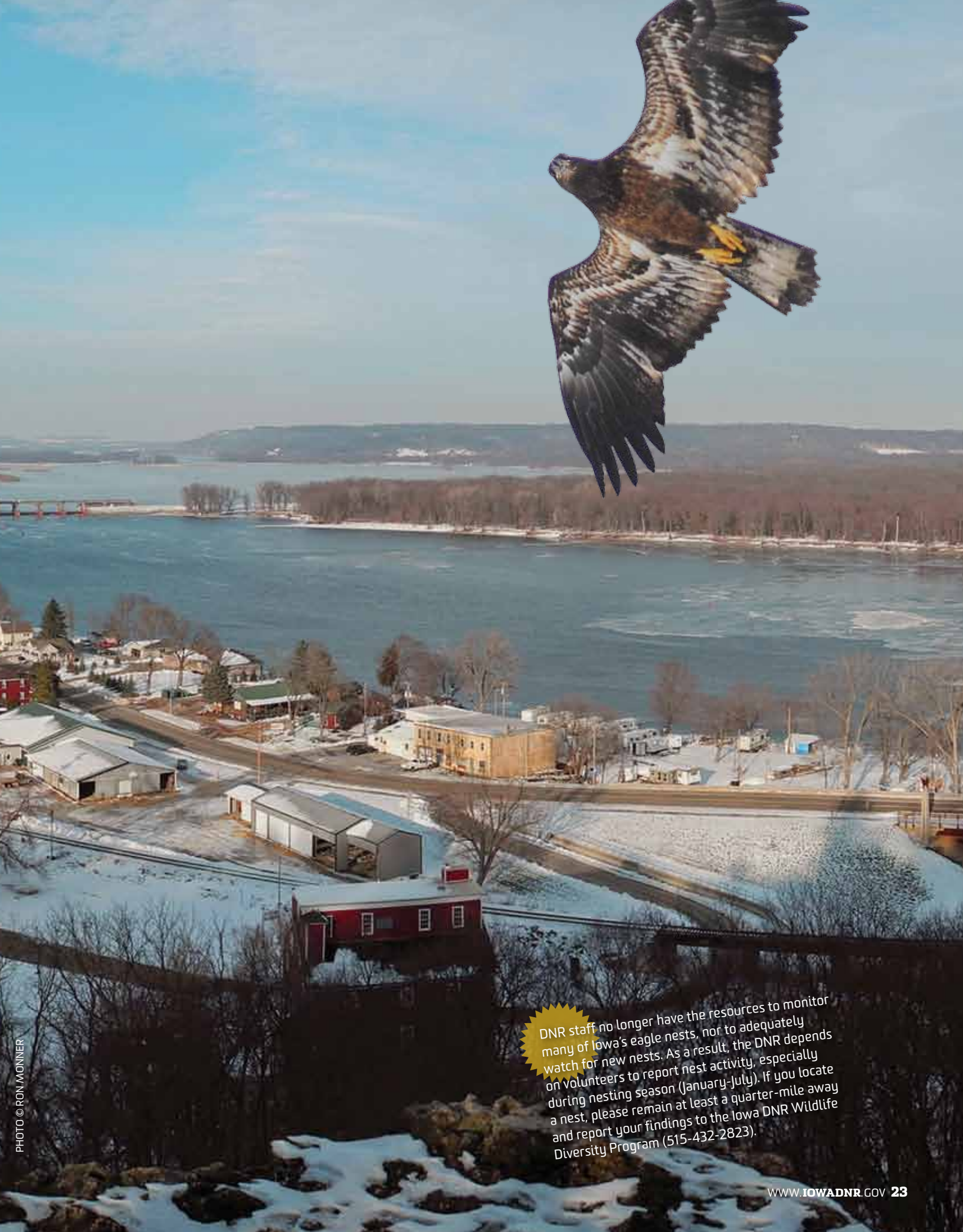
- A boat cell phones or radios in, asking to be allowed through the lock. While the boat waits outside the lock, an operator opens or closes the water valves inside to the water level of the craft. Nothing is pumped—the water is gravity-fed.

- When the water gets to the watercraft's level, an operator pulls a lever in the control stand and the gates will swing open.

- The operator toots the horn and signals a green light for the vessel to enter the chamber. The operator greets the boat in the chamber and allows the boat to tie off. The operator closes the gates and either raises or lowers the water.

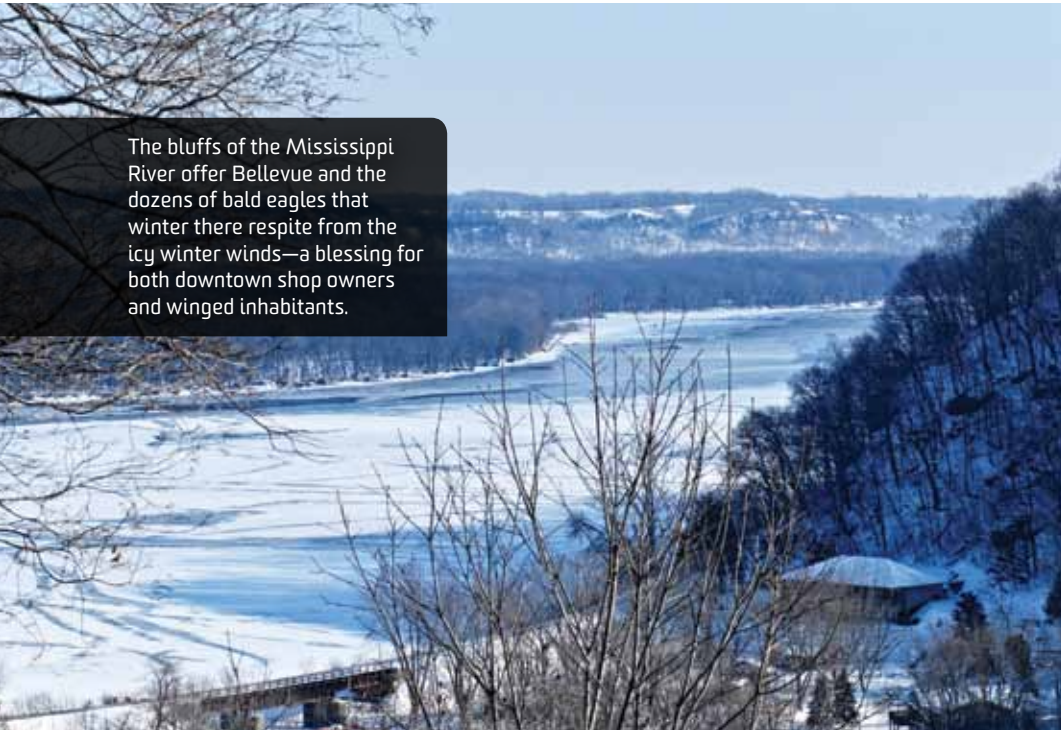
- The opposite lock operator now opens the other gate and allows the vessel to depart. "That's what we do, back and forth," says Hainstock.

"Towboat, pleasure craft, canoe, paddle board, jet ski, a handmade boat from barrels and water bottles—we've locked about everything," says Hainstock. "As long as they have their registration, they can lock through."

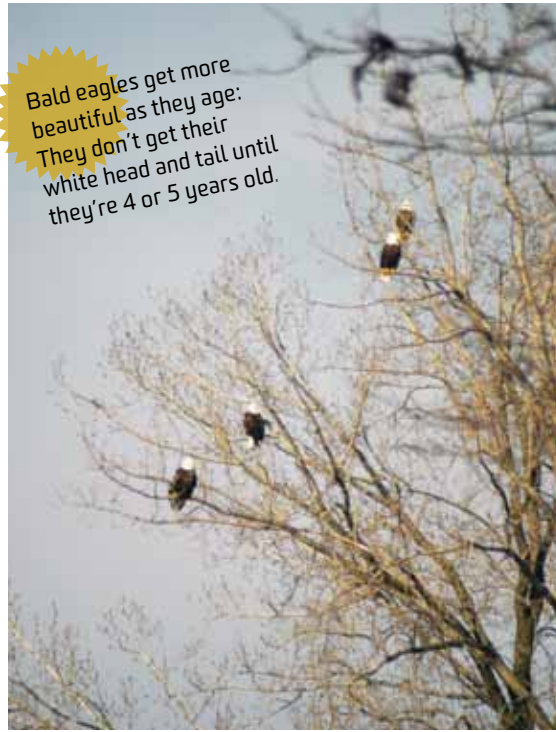


DNR staff no longer have the resources to monitor many of Iowa's eagle nests, nor to adequately watch for new nests. As a result, the DNR depends on volunteers to report nest activity, especially during nesting season (January-July). If you locate a nest, please remain at least a quarter-mile away and report your findings to the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program (515-432-2823).

Lost In Iowa



The bluffs of the Mississippi River offer Bellevue and the dozens of bald eagles that winter there respite from the icy winter winds—a blessing for both downtown shop owners and winged inhabitants.



Bald eagles get more beautiful as they age: They don't get their white head and tail until they're 4 or 5 years old.

More wild places

There isn't much local ice fishing in winter, due to silt build-up largely from farm run-off. If the water is low at Mill Creek, under the bridge on the south side of town, there's a big rock shoal that comes off the mouth where you might catch some bluegill or crappie in areas of no-flow. You'll pass a stocked kids' trout fishing pond on the river next to Mill Creek. Other local ice fishing areas include Brown's Lake near Green Island (see below) and Middle and South Sabula lakes.

But the dam's tailwaters are the most popular, perfect for boat fishing if the ice has broken up, especially for saugers and walleye. Anglers snag paddlefish in season (March 1-April 15).

Back at the dam, lockmaster Hainstock points to the fishing boats on the downstream side of the dam.

"There's an 80-foot hole out where that eagle is hunting," he says. "Flathead catfish like to hang out there. Biggest one I've ever seen was 45 pounds. But there might be bigger than that. This is a very good place to fish."

You never know quite what you'll see at this unique confluence of man and river. Maybe a coyote slinking over the ice, or the occasional swan flying overhead. Late winter, birding starts to pick up even more as migrating waterfowl merge onto the gigantic Mississippi River flyway. A few years ago, Hainstock saw a black-necked stilt and a glossy ibis.

Standing on the dam's iron-grate walkway, Hainstock once observed a huge and silent wave of monarch butterfly migration. "Most awe-inspiring thing I've ever seen," he says. "Those monarchs were just riding the updraft, thousands of them, heading south."

You've got to stay right on the river to catch such moments, and you can do that in downtown Bellevue.

Not even a quarter mile from No. 12 is a cluster of nicely renovated former WPA shacks called Moon River Cabins, on high ground above the water. In winter, it's the closest and coolest view of all those big birds. One may even land on the tree outside your window, close enough to study the pattern of its feathers. In summer, there's also a grill joint.

Perched on the north bluff of the village is the Mont Rest Inn, "out in the middle of nowhere, and darn proud of it," according to co-owner Christine Baker. Baker owned a Tipton B&B when she read a 1986 story in the Des Moines Register about a haunted mansion brooding over Bellevue.

"I stood out on the front porch looking at this view, and I didn't even have to look inside. I knew this was it. There's nothing quite like Bellevue."

Wildlife photographers like to hike the five miles of mowed dikes at the Green Island Wildlife Management Area, 3,500 acres of marsh and timberland just below the mouth of the Maquoketa River, eight miles southeast of Bellevue. Each end of the levy connects with the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge, winding past a series of lakes, floodplain forest and oxbow sloughs. There's a chance to snap many Iowa fur-bearing species: raccoon, beaver, deer, muskrat, you name it.

Wildlife staff say you could spot a pileated woodpecker almost any day of the spring or summer. Staff flood this marshland temporarily in the fall to maintain epic duck hunting conditions that are wildly popular in season.

Due to flooding and siltation, the shallow backwaters can't maintain decent oxygen levels for overwintering fish. If winter conditions are mild, summer fishing is decent. Seven interconnected lakes total 350 acres that support largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie, perch, bullhead, rough fish and northern pike.

As Hainstock says, there's never a dull moment in Bellevue, even when the snow flies.

"It's a very good place to be, right up here where the eagles soar."

Travel Notes

Where to Eat

Grandpa's Parlour. Big ole breakfasts, smoked pork sandwiches and great hard-serve ice cream, on the riverfront. Open mid-April to Christmas Day, closed Mon-Tues. **563-872-4240**

Carousel Corner. Homemade soups and sandwiches. Try the bread pudding with caramel sauce for dessert, downtown. **563-872-5606**

The Happy Bean. Solid menu throughout the day right on Riverview Street, plus a small market, gallery, decent coffee and pastries. **563-872-3164.**

Second Street Station. Pizza and burgers in a nice, family-friendly pool-table bar-restaurant downtown. **563-872-5410**

Where to Stay

Moon River Cabins. Cabins are small, but they've got all you need in a fresh little space overlooking the river. Cabins for 2 from \$150, cabins for 4-6 from \$200. **877-872-4220; moonrivercabins.com**

Mont Rest Inn. Eagles roost in the trees on this hill overlooking Bellevue and the river, and you can hear them chattering in some of the 13 rooms of this giant 1890s home (all with in-room working fireplaces). Packages and

themed weekends available. Doubles from \$149. **877-872-4220; Montrest.com.**

Baymont Inn & Suites. Newly opened June 28, 2013. **Baymontinns.com**

What to Do

Bellevue State Park. The Nelson Unit features a butterfly garden, picnic areas, panoramic river views. Call manager Shannon Petersen at **563-872-4019** to show you the nature center in winter. **Dyas Unit** three miles south of town has an eagle's nest along the south road, hiking, picnic areas, an interpretive nature trail and a stream. 30 electric, 14 non-electric camp sites, modern restrooms and showers, dump station, playground. 200 acres of public hunting. Call the park office for more information. **iowadnr.gov; 563-872-4019.**

Green Island Wildlife Management Area. Park in the headquarters lot and stop in to get the low-down on this tract of land. Hike the trail behind the building and get a very wild and amazing view of the village and river. **563-357-2035.**

Lock and Dam No. 12. **www.mvr.usace.army.mil/Portals/48/docs/CC/FactSheets/Miss/LockandDam12.pdf**

Riverview main street shops. Highlights include **The Bookworm**, independent bookshop with new and used books, antiques, stained glass, rocks and fossils, barn board picture frames **563-872-4802; bellevuebookworm.com** and **Jo Quilter Fabrics**, well known for fabrics and quilts **563-542-6605.** 🐻



Gazebo along Bellevue's riverfront park.

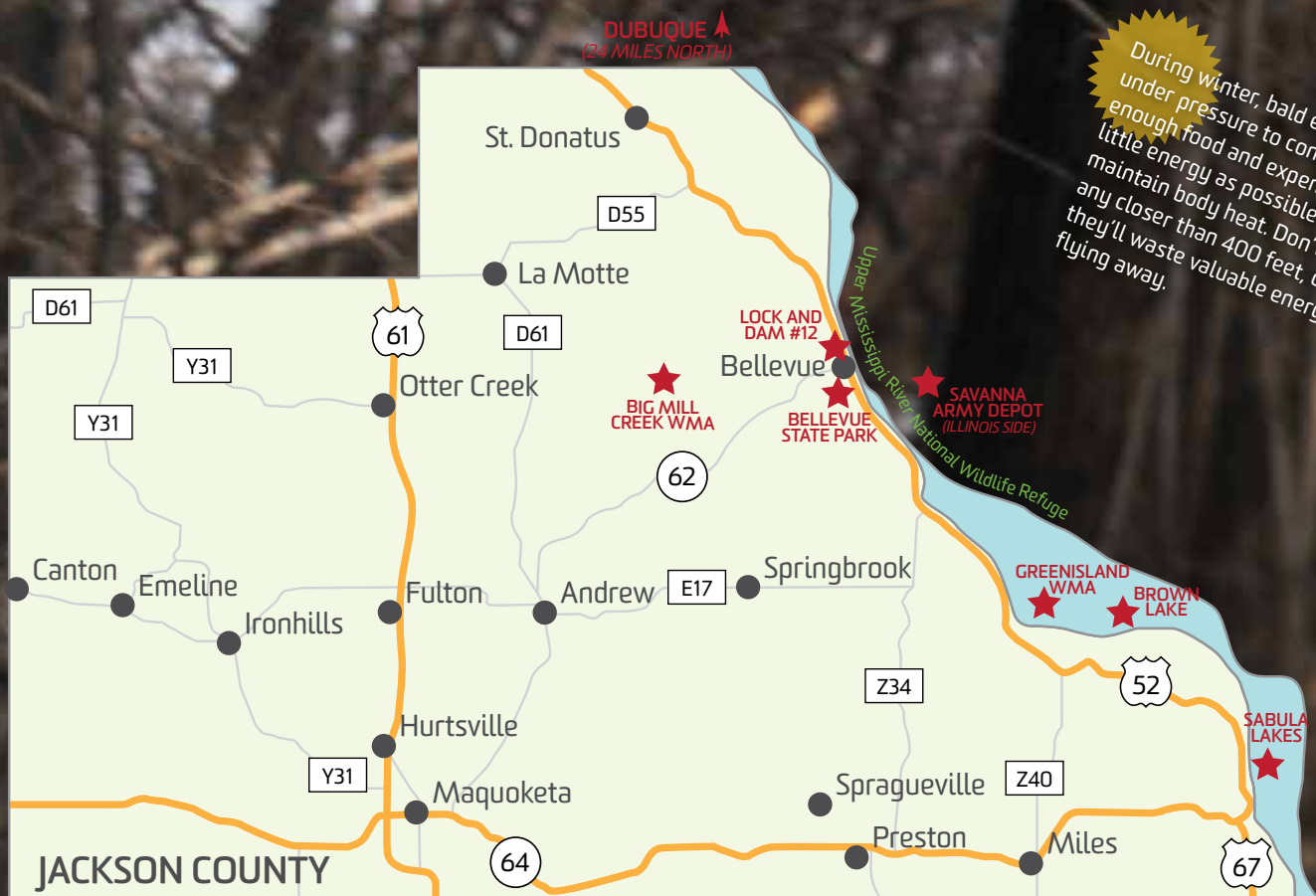


Lock and dam 12 in Bellevue

Lost In Iowa

Bald eagles fish with their talons, but also get many meals scavenging carrion or stealing kills from other animals. They live near water and favor coasts and lakes where fish are plentiful, though they will also snare and eat small mammals.





During winter, bald eagles are under pressure to consume enough food and expend as little energy as possible to maintain body heat. Don't get any closer than 400 feet, or they'll waste valuable energy flying away.

An eagle can carry items up to half its body weight. With an upper-end size of 15 pounds, a large eagle could carry nearly a gallon of water. Its strength comes from leg muscles, tendons and bones. A unique relationship between the tendons and tendon sheaths creates a ratcheting effect within the feet, allowing the eagle to maintain its grip for long periods without muscle fatigue (HawkQuest). Some research indicates eagles can exert 1,000 pounds of pressure in each foot (American Eagle Foundation), or about 10 times that of humans (HawkQuest).